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ABSTRACT

The provision of respite services for families with adolescents who are at risk of abusing or neglecting the young person is discussed, with attention to program design, services to parents, and services to adolescents. Respite programs can provide an important resource for families that lack sufficient supports to deal with the difficult period of adolescence, by providing a safe haven for family members to take a break from one another. A variety of family support services may be effective and may be provided on an individual or group basis. For an adolescent respite program to be successful, attention may need to focus on communication skills, behavior management, support groups for providing parent education, and parent counseling. Services for adolescents may be provided in schools, churches, or community facilities and may include recreational activities, support groups, and remedial academic programs. Mentoring can be valuable to the adolescent in order to experience adult friendship and positive role models. Adolescent support groups and individual counseling can also be helpful. Two national resource organizations are identified. (SW)

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Respite Services for Families with Adolescents at Risk of Abuse or Neglect

Introduction

Growing up in the United States today can be challenging for young people, who typically struggle with the desire for independence, physical changes, and questions about the future and the world around them. Societal issues facing adolescents include a significant increase in the breakdown of the family unit, an increase in violence toward and by adolescents, and the changing roles and attitudes of schools. Society also tends to judge adolescents' worthiness, motivation, and ability to be valuable contributors to their communities.

Even in the best of circumstances, adolescents and their families may struggle to meet these and other challenges. For a family at-risk because of poverty, inadequate parenting skills, or other factors, caring for an adolescent may be particularly stressful. Existing resources and coping mechanisms may be stretched to a breaking point.

Respite programs can make a dramatic impact on families with adolescents who are at risk of abuse and neglect by providing a safe haven in which family members can take a break from one another. As with all respite programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect, respite programs for adolescents offer support services to help strengthen families and enable them to remain together despite difficult times.

Program Design

Adolescents, like younger children, need a supportive environment and resource to turn to when their family lives become overwhelming and stressful. It is important that respite programs be designed in terms that are acceptable and inviting for adolescents. Services must be "age-appropriate," or resistance and rebellion may prohibit a young person's ability to accept and receive help.

Because adolescents are initiating and refining their interactions with those around them, the entire family must be considered when a respite program for adolescents is being developed. The program design should incorporate family-focused strategies that include parents, siblings, extended family and any other household members. Increasing the knowledge, cooperation, and support of all family members will ultimately strengthen the family as a unit and reduce the chance of abuse and neglect within the home. This family-centered approach to services will

- focus on the needs of the family as a unit and how it functions
- view adolescents and their families in the context of their environment
- assess and deliver services in a comprehensive, coordinated manner
- provide a variety of services based on consumer needs
- facilitate accessibility of services after the thirty day time frame
- build upon family strengths and affirm cultural values
- tailor services to the needs of the community

In addition to respite, there are a variety of family support services that may be effective for adolescents who are at-risk and their families. These services may be individual or group-based and may be available in the adolescent's home, the school, or a community center. The combination of respite, family support services, and community services, such as recreational and academic enrichment activities, will help adolescents and their families experience positive growth and development.

Services to Parents

Developing positive parent-child interactions is critical to the success of any respite program for adolescents.

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Attention may need to be focused on poor communication, behavior management skills and unrealistic developmental expectations. Participation by both parent and child in affiliated family support services may enable parents to develop new skills in child rearing, build positive self-esteem in themselves and their adolescents, and improve family-child relationships.

Communication Skills

Often adolescents do not believe their parents understand their needs, and parents do not feel their children understand them. Communication issues may be particularly challenging for families from other countries who speak their native language in the home. For example, often schools are unable to communicate directly with these parents due to language barriers, and students tell their parents what they want them to hear. This can lead to serious problems within the family and with the family's relationship to the community. The respite program can provide resources to help parents and adolescents develop better communication and interpersonal skills.

Parent Resources

Professional resources offer many education curricula specifically designed for parents of adolescents. These include the *Nurturing Program for Parents and Adolescents* developed by Dr. Stephen Bavolek (1988); *Active Parenting of Teens* by Dr. Michael Popkin (1990); *S.T.E.P. (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) Teen* developed by Don Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay (1990); and *Empowering Teenagers and Yourself in the Process* by Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott (1990).

These resources provide information on improving communication skills, developing effective behavior management skills, and understanding developmental milestones. The knowledge gained in parent training programs will help parents develop confidence in their ability to guide their children through adolescence and into adulthood.

Support Groups

Many respite programs offer parent support groups as an effective strategy for providing parent education as well as support. A trained facilitator can assist the group in discussing issues of mutual concern. Facilitators may be trained professionals or they may be volunteers who have come through the program themselves. Parents find it reassuring to hear from other parents who have "been there too." Developing a supportive peer group can also increase parents' confidence in their parenting skills.

Counseling

Therapeutic guidance for parents can be a link for bringing youth and parents closer together. By discussing issues such as self-esteem, divorce, substance abuse, and sexual abuse, adults may develop greater insight and understanding of themselves and their given situations, especially their role as parents.

Services to Adolescents

Respite programs for adolescents must carefully consider how respite will be offered and which types of support services will be most effective. Because of adolescents' developmental need to establish independence, challenging authority is a normal behavior that programs must be prepared to handle.

Center-based Services

Center-based respite services for adolescents at risk of abuse and neglect may be provided in schools, churches, or community facilities and include activities such as camping trips, dances, sports leagues, theater, support groups, and remedial academic programs.

A center-based respite program can use incentives to promote leadership, cooperation, and peer-interaction skills such as team building and problem solving. Adolescents appreciate having a place they can call their own, where they can become involved in decorating walls, arranging rooms, helping with upkeep, caring for the center's pets or aquarium, and other activities that help build self-help skills.

Mentoring

Mentoring has proven to be effective in working with adolescents in respite programs. Through mentoring activities, adults offer friendship and provide positive role models to encourage adolescents to see life in a new way. It is important that mentors work in conjunction with parents to ensure that their relationship with adolescents will not contradict family values and traditions.

A mentor can help build an adolescent's self-esteem by giving positive feedback, by providing companionship that might not otherwise exist, by sharing concerns and discussing current issues, and by being someone to count on in a time of crisis.

Commonly, a male or female mentor will be matched to a young person of the same sex. They may help the teen academically by tutoring them or by attending class part of the school day. A mentor may advocate for a teen and calm a teen during an "acting out" period. Mentors may visit in the home or take walks to the park "just to talk." Often conversations may lead to topics the teen finds difficult to discuss with other people. While the teen receives support and encouragement, a true

and valuable friendship–which is often a crucial missing piece in the life of an at-risk youth–may be formed.

Support Groups

Adolescent support groups, which offer peer support and mentoring in a safe and nonthreatening environment, may take place during school or after school. Sometimes it is assumed that adolescents already having difficulty in school should not miss class to attend an in-school support group. However, today's research supports opportunities for young people that will help them function better both in the classroom and outside the school setting. Divorce, peer pressure, alcohol and drugs, gangs, conflict resolution, friendships, sexuality and diseases, problem solving, or other topics suggested by adolescents are all issues that could be discussed through a teen support group.

Counseling

Respite programs may also offer adolescents individualized counseling. Individualized counseling provides a therapeutic relationship and helps guide and support a teen to tackle intimate areas of concern. The counselor and teen can develop an individualized plan with obtainable goals and objectives. For counseling to be effective, a true partnership that respects the adolsecent's needs must be formed. "Stuffiness" on the part of the counselor could lead to resistance from young people seeking help. Counselors must maintain objectivity, advocating for both the adolescent and the family.

Summary

Adolescence, that time in life when individuals move from childhood to adulthood, is a major developmental milestone that can be challenging for families under the best of circumstances. For families that lack sufficient supports, the stress can lead to frustration and, at times, to violence. Respite programs can provide an important resource for such families. By having time apart from one another, the adolescent and family can create space to examine the sources of their conflicts and seek resolutions. Respite programs serving adolescents and their families will need to offer a variety of support services to help increase family stability. Effective respite programs can strengthen families and prevent abuse and/or neglect.

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Resources

National Network of Runaway Youth Services, 1319 F Street, N.W., Suite 401, Washington, DC 20004, (202) 783-7949.

National Resource Center for Youth Service, University of Oklahoma, 202 West Eighth Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 74119-1419, (918) 585-2986.

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